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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2018
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2376
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2683
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000759

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/23/2018

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA HOPES SINIORA, AND NOT SAAD HARIRI, IS NEW PM

REF: BEIRUT 733

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea believes that current PM Fouad Siniora should stay on as the new PM when the government is formed following the election of a new Lebanese president on May 25. Majority leader and PM front-runner candidate Saad Hariri, he argued, would be more valuable campaigning on the ground in preparation for the end of spring 2009 parliamentary elections. Geagea underscored March 14's biggest success out of the Doha negotiations -- the omission of the word "resistance" in reference to Hizballah, which he noted is the first Arab statement to not include this term.

¶2. (C) Geagea is concerned about electing Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman without first amending the constitution. He disapproves of Syrian FM Walid Moallem attending Sleiman's swearing-in ceremony and hopes the U.S. can work to counter-balance this optic. Geagea is also worried about Sleiman selecting a "neutral" Interior Minister, which he believes would lead to a passive Interior Ministry at a time when major decisions need to be made. End summary.

SINIORA SHOULD
STAY ON AS PM

¶3. (C) The Charge, accompanied by PolOff, met with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, and his advisors Elie Khoury and Joseph Tohme, at his residence in Maarab on May 24. Always thinking tactically, Geagea expressed his opinion that current Prime Minister Fouad Siniora should stay on as PM until parliamentary elections are held at the end of spring ¶2009.

¶4. (C) Geagea argued that majority leader Saad Hariri, who has been considered the front-runner for the position, instead focus his efforts on campaigning for his Future Movement party to win parliamentary seats in 2009. Moreover, he reasoned, the current perception is that Siniora has been defeated, especially after rescinding the two controversial Cabinet decisions on transferring the head of airport security and declaring Hizballah's fiber optics network

illegal. It would be better if he stayed on, Geagea explained, and finished his tenure in a stronger position.

¶15. (C) Geagea added that the next ten months will require difficult decisions, particularly financial decisions, and it will be better if Siniora weathers through these battles, since he has proven himself to be financially conservative. In the meantime, Geagea said, Saad can be out campaigning, at which Siniora would not be as effective, and keeping his reputation intact. He told us that former PM Najib Mikati and Transport Minister Mohammed Safadi are no longer in the running to become the new PM.

¶16. (C) Geagea told us that Saudi Arabia does not want Saad to be the next PM. He also added that Saad's father, former PM Rafiq Hariri, spent ten years doing campaigning legwork before becoming the PM. March 14 is not unified in its position on the next PM, he claimed.

(Comment: We understand Geagea's logic about the value of Siniora staying on, however, we question whether Saad would step up to a serious campaigning role, or if he would view this as a lost opportunity to be PM and choose instead to spend his time in Saudi Arabia. End comment.)

SUCCESS OF DOHA IS
OMISSION OF "RESISTANCE"

¶17. (C) Geagea proudly told us that the Arab League statement resulting from the Doha negotiations (reftel) is the first Arab statement that does not mention "resistance" related to

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Hizballah, and instead uses the term "military organization." He noted that this was a significant omission, and believes it to be March 14's greatest victory out of Doha. Noting the longer-term implications of this omission, he expected many battles to come, highlighting in particular the ministerial statement the new Cabinet will issue. He said the last ministerial statement in 2005 used the word "resistance."

IMPORTANT FOR NEW GOVERNMENT
TO IMPLEMENT DOHA AGREEMENT

¶18. (C) The Charge told Geagea that it was important that Lebanon's political leadership implement the Doha agreement in its entirety, in accordance with the Arab League initiative and in conformity with the relevant UNSCRs. Charge noted that the Doha Agreement called for dialogue on ways to reinforce the state's authority on all of its territory and its relations with the various parties in such a way as to guarantee state sovereignty. The dialogue would take place under the chairmanship of the president once a national unity cabinet had been named and in partnership with the Arab League, Doha participants had agreed.

¶19. (C) Geagea agreed with the Charge, and said that he hoped the new ministerial statement will elaborate on how state institutions will be strengthened. He added that in the next day's (May 25) parliamentary session, the MPs would begin discussing the districting portion of electoral law.

SLEIMAN SHOULD NOT
CHOOSE INTERIOR MINISTER

¶10. (C) Underscoring the importance of the Interior Ministry, Geagea said he does not believe Sleiman should choose its minister. "It'll be another Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)," he complained, meaning that Sleiman will choose someone neutral, and the Interior Ministry will be in observation-mode, rather than actively taking decisions. He explained that the president will negotiate with the PM which three cabinet positions he will fill.

¶11. (C) Geagea anticipates that the PM will be decided by Wednesday, May 28 and, best case, it will take one to two weeks to fill the Cabinet positions. However, he said, he is not optimistic that the ministerial posts will be easily resolved.

¶12. (C) The worst case scenario, he said, would be that no new Cabinet is formed. Once a president is elected, Geagea explained, all of the current ministers are considered resigned but continue in their positions as a caretaker government until a new Cabinet is formed. That includes the six ministers who resigned in 2006. With no agreement on a new cabinet, the current cabinet would serve as a caretaker government until the parliamentary elections.

NO DECISION YET ON HOW TO
RAISE AMENDMENT CONCERN

¶13. (C) To record his call for a constitutional amendment to elect LAF Commander Michel Sleiman as president, Geagea explained that he signed the Doha agreement "with reservation" as a matter of principle. He explained that the president must start his term with complete legitimacy.

¶14. (C) He said that his five MPs will attend the parliamentary session tomorrow (May 25) to elect a president, but will refrain from voting. Noting that March 14 key figure Boutros Harb will also abstain from voting, Geagea said that other March 14 MPs had not yet decided whether they would raise this issue before or during the session. He added that he has not heard of any March 8 MPs calling for an amendment. (Comment. Geagea's comments may be colored by his personal reservations about March 14's agreeing to the election of Sleiman and the traditional antipathy his group, the Lebanese Forces, has toward the Lebanese Armed Forces dating from the civil war. End comment)

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SYRIAN FM ATTENDANCE
IS PROBLEMATIC

¶15. (C) Having heard that the Iranian and Syrian FMs plan to attend the swearing-in ceremony for president-designate Sleiman tomorrow, Geagea implored the Charge for a counter-balance to Syrian FM Walid Moallem's presence. He suggested that either the Arab League try to discourage Moallem from attending, or alternatively, he wondered if Secretary Rice or NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary Welch could attend.

¶16. (C) Advisor Elie Khoury told us Egypt's FM would attend, and Jordan and Saudi Arabia's FMs were likely to come. Geagea said he may try to encourage his March 14 counterparts to boycott the ceremony if Moallem comes without a counter-balance. The French, Italian, and Spanish FM's do not constitute a counter-balance, according to Geagea. (Note: Subsequent meetings with Defense Minister/Deputy Prime Minister Elias Murr and Future Movement leader Saad Hariri are covered septel. End note.)
SISON